



Rafayel



Story

Addictive Pain

+ LOVE AND DEEPSPACE +

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01 | Ignition

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This year's summer in Linkon City was tranquil. That is until one fateful night, a masterpiece named *Illusion* made a grand entrance and stirred the art world. The name "Rafayel" surged like a tidal wave, striking the soul of every artist in Linkon. His influence, just like his artwork, swiftly blazed through the entire art community.

As the exhibition ends, Rafayel is greeted by art world representatives from over a dozen media outlets outside the venue.

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Just as expected.

"Mr. Rafayel, we're from *Face to Art*. May we request a moment of your time for an interview? We promise it won't take long!"

"Mr. Rafayel, may I ask what motivated your sudden decision to return to your homeland?"

"Some criticize your artwork as baseless fantasies and devoid of soul. What is your response to that?"

Rafayel maintains a slight smile, remaining silent and aloof.

Contrary to his elegant demeanor, his red

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suit exudes a fiery passion as intense as burning flames.

Persistent reporters still try to dig deeper, hoping to uncover secrets the public is even more curious about. "Mr. Rafayel, would it be all right to ask where you come from? Some speculate that you're actually royalty from a certain maritime civilization."

"An island?" Rafayel continues to walk, a faint smile playing on his lips. "Atlantis, maybe?"

"Your work does embody a certain

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romantic charm."

This question is answered amid the laughter of the reporters.

Before getting into the car, a crowd races to the roadside.

A person asks, "One final question, Mr. Rafayel. Why did you choose to come to Linkon City?"

A fleeting, elusive glimmer flashes in Rafayel's eyes, so brief that no one catches it.

"...Linkon City and the people within it invoke a sense of wonder for me."

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"Can you describe that feeling?"

With a momentary lapse in his aloof smile, Rafayel speaks earnestly.

"Like spice smeared on your hand, on the tip of your tongue."

"So, it's a flavor?"

"Is it?" Rafayel steps into the car and shuts the door. He offers no clear answer to the rhetorical question, nor does he intend to get an answer.

Only he knows it's not a matter of taste, but a sense of perception.

An addictive, painful kind.

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02 | Another Disguise

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The phone on the bedside table vibrates, waking Rafayel from his sleep in the hotel bed.

Overnight, his inbox is flooded with a variety of invitations and visitation requests. Most of these are from various art organizations, media outlets, and individual artists.

He scrolls down, flipping through several pages before his finger abruptly stops. "Shining a spotlight on Linkon City's universities. Interviews with student representatives from 34 different majors."

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02 | Another Disguise

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The out-of-place headline instantly captures his attention.

"University... She should still be a college student."

Someone forwarded this email to him.

Rafayel taps on it and examines each photo. Before he finishes, he pauses.

In the photograph, the student representatives of the university are all smiles, radiating joy and optimism. Behind them is a building with a glass spire, on which hangs a sign bearing the name of the university.

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At the same time, he receives a new message from the sender of this email. "University of Linkon. That's where the person you're looking for is."

There's a knock on the door. Rafayel silences his phone and rises from the bed. "Here's your mail, sir. Please take it," the hotel's robot says, standing at the door. Its metallic, blocky hands hold a stack of letters.

Unsurprisingly, it's not just a bunch of emails that arrive, but also a flood of

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physical letters.

Rafayel takes them, returns to his room, and tosses them onto the table.

He is still thinking about what kind of excuse he should use to show up at the University of Linkon.

A renowned artist, wandering aimlessly through the campus each day and inquiring about the whereabouts of a particular girl, is likely to make the headlines in no time. It... would be best to carry this out in secret.

As he thinks, he inadvertently looks at

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several invitation letters for lectures.

His gaze lingers on them for a moment. A thought spontaneously springs to mind.

The University of Linkon's Art Center, crowned with a glass spire, houses Rafayel's lecture in its largest auditorium, capable of accommodating many people. The aforementioned artist sits on the stage. As he wraps up his extraordinary lecture about his art, he sweeps his gaze over each face in the audience below.

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She is in this school, possibly within reach. However, it's a pipe dream to think that someone he's been chasing after for many years would willingly appear here.

"Mr. Rafayel, can I ask you a question that's not related to the lecture?" A student's voice from below the podium pulls Rafayel out of his hazy thoughts. Rafayel adjusts his sitting position. "Sure." "I heard you're not particularly fond of discussing your artistic philosophy in public, even turning down invitations from professional art institutions. So why did

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you agree to give a lecture at our school?
Is there something here that particularly
appeals to you?"

The student grins, suggesting that his line
of questioning is far from over.

"Is your ex here?"

A sudden uproar fills the entire lecture
hall. After a while, as the students slowly
quiet down, Rafayel responds.

"Maybe."

Just as the cacophony is about to subside,
noise surges again like a wave rising from
the ocean.

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Rafayel pretends to share in their joy. His eyes, filled with laughter, slowly shift to outside the window.

After the lecture ends, Rafayel leaves the auditorium. The Dean of the College of Fine Arts invites him to his office for tea, and incidentally, brings up the matter of signing on as a visiting professor.

The campus is lush with greenery. With students moving back and forth, Rafayel feels a little better as he walks down these streets.

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02 | Another Disguise

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However, the tranquility doesn't last long.
"Thank you, but I'd like to take a stroll on
my own and soak in the atmosphere of the
campus."

"Hold on, there's one more thing."

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03 | A New Player

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Inside a private booth on the second floor of The Nest, Rafayel lounges on the sofa, idly playing with a coin in his hand.

"It's not easy to secure a meeting with a renowned, up-and-coming artist," the person seated across remarks, his greeting laced with hidden implications.

Rafayel doesn't look at him as he places the coin on the table. "As long as you can provide valuable info, there will always be an opportunity for us to meet."

"The lecture at Linkon University was very popular. It seems you received my email."

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03 | A New Player

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As the man speaks, he pulls out a file. He opens it, takes out some photos, and places them on the table.

"Here's what you requested. Quite a few people are keeping an eye on her. From what I can see, some have been planning for years. They're setting things into motion."

"The threads of fate have already spun a web around her. You're entering the game late, but... If we act immediately, we might just get the upper hand by catching the others off guard."

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03 | A New Player

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Rafayel listens half-heartedly, scanning the photos with no discernable emotion.

To join now... It would be a late entrance, but he doesn't need to.

He's been in the game since the beginning.

"What do you have on the others?"

The man shrugs. "I can't dig any deeper.

With your current status, you should have more channels than me."

He takes out another photo and places it on the right. "Here's a bonus just for you."

She's in the photo, captured from a distance.

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Rafayel's expression becomes a little colder. "I believe I told you not to approach her."

"She didn't notice. Just an ordinary college student, going to class during the day and spending time with friends afterward. She sometimes joins in extracurricular activities. She's completely unaware of us. Besides... is she your type?"

"Don't ask unnecessary questions." Rafayel chuckles. He picks up the girl's photograph and stands. "And don't do anything unnecessary either."

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Suddenly, flames incinerate the file in the man's hands as well as the photos on the table. It is intense, blinding.
"Otherwise, you'll never be able to work with anyone ever again."

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04 | Bait

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Linkon University's campus is accessible to everyone. Rafayel strolls under the shade of the tree-lined path, surrounded by hundreds of people.

Ever since he gave that lecture, he has grown to love the campus ambiance. Green leaves and red bricks. The area resonates with simple, crisp laughter and shouts. Even the air is saturated with the floral scent of late summer, invigorating and refreshing.

What a free, shallow sea... Under the sun, the water is so clear that one can see the

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bottom.

Everyone is but a school of fish in this vast ocean, including himself.

But she is only bait, disguised as a tiny red fish.

It's possible that at this very moment, she's in the crowd. She may be still in some classroom he has yet to pass by. It's possible that in an unguarded moment, unnoticed by him, she has already brushed past him.

No matter where she is, her aura has

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already attracted too many predators that don't belong in these waters. Rafayel knows if he takes the bait and appears by her side without meticulous planning, he will undoubtedly become prey.

And there might be someone lurking in the shadows, using her as bait to capture him.

Rafayel knows that since he's already reached this point, there's no need to rush. He must ensure his absolute safety before doing anything rash.

Moreover, he is willing to spend the rest of

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his days with her.

He wants to settle the score with her, bit by bit, slowly and steadily.

At this thought, a deep-seated pain stings his heart, gradually seeping down, permeating his entire being. This process is undeniably painful, yet it's addictive.

A leaf flutters, landing on Rafayel's shoulder. He stops, brushing off the leaf, and his gaze falls upon the scoreboard standing nearby.

By a strange twist of fate, the photograph of a familiar face is right there.

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Rafayel recognizes her at first glance, so many years later. This photograph is clearer than any he had seen before. He can recognize her features, which have changed a little from what he remembers. She's no longer as young as before, yet her eyes still twinkle with the same mirth as they always had.

A voice echoes from deep in his heart.

"Long time no see."

"Aren't you that famous painter? Raf—"

The students nearby notice him and burst

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into excitement. Rafayel turns around and shushes them.

The other person is overjoyed. Rafayel points to the pictures on the board and asks, "Do you know where the students of this major usually have their classes?"

No one can resist helping a well-mannered, renowned person.

"There's no fixed classroom for lectures, but most students take their elective courses on the fifth floor." He points to the facility behind him. "At that building over there!"

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Rafayel looks at the building for a moment, then his eyes shift to the floors. One, two, three, four... He's counting.

He counts out fifty steps.

In fifty steps, he will be that much closer to her.

"Thank you. Also, please don't mention this to anyone else."

"No problem! But does your...?"

"Sure," Rafayel says and turns away from the bulletin board. "But it loses its charm if you say it out loud."

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The more information he learns, the less hurried he feels.

For every step they take, it will only take a few to reunite.

Besides, he has taken the bait she used once before.

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05 | Unexpected Encounter

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A week later, the Dean's office.


"Fantastic, you will be our visiting professor for a year, Mr. Rafayel!" The Dean of the College of Fine Arts, satisfied, puts away the two-paged contract Rafayel signed in a file.

"I hope we will have a wonderful time working together."

Rafayel decided to be a visiting professor. Sometimes, there's a unique pleasure in observing a small fish swimming alone in a vast, unknown whirlpool.

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"So, Mr. Rafayel, do you have any thoughts on the topic for the first lecture?"

He gives it some thought for a while.

Grinning, he says, "Let's start with the history of art."

As he speaks, Rafayel turns his gaze toward the window.

"Let me tell you a story, a chapter of art history that never made it into textbooks."

Soon, posters for the lecture series, Lost Sea: Lemuria's Art and Civilization by Rafayel, fill every corner of the campus.

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Inside the campus café, Rafayel is seated by the window. He's leafing through a slim book of colors. An almost empty cup of coffee is in front of him.

The ancient civilization of Lemuria, a subject long forgotten, has suddenly become a popular topic on the campus with the help of Rafayel.

"There's an empty table over here."

"By the way, what was the name of the cake we ordered last time? It was absolutely delicious!"

Just as it was time for the mid-morning

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break, a group of girls arrived and settled down in the seats behind him.

"I think it's... Sea Salt Cheese?"

A familiar voice gently tickles Rafayel's ears.

"Sea Salt Cheese, like a summer day by the seaside. That shell-shaped design..."

Outside the window, a leaf falls. The girl continues to converse with her friends, but Rafayel can no longer make out her words.

A summer day by the seaside.

Seashells...

The sea.

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Though her voice has matured, her pronunciation, enunciation, the rhythm of her speech, and even the emphasis in her sentences... Every word strikes like a drumbeat, awakening long-buried memories in his mind.

"Have you been keeping up with the Lemuria lectures at the art school? I want to attend one! But I heard the spots filled up as soon as they opened!"

Her friend speaks with a heart full of sadness, yet the girl's voice carries a hint

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of confusion. "Lemuria?"

"You surely know about it!"

"...I was busy preparing for my thesis proposal." She laughs.

The girl's confusion is somewhat weird, leaving him uncertain as to whether she has never heard of Lemuria before or is simply unsure what the lecture is about. Rafayel glides the spoon along the rim of his coffee cup as he listens.

If the seasonings aren't sufficiently added, the spice will be a mediocrity.

The conversation behind him has already

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moved on. He sees no point in staying here any longer.

Rafayel places the spoon on the coaster.

He raises a hand and gets the attention of a passing waiter.

"Check, please."

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06 | A Perfect Opportunity

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Morning, in the studio of the Art Center...

The students move their easels to the sides of the classroom, their eyes focused on the canvas Rafayel has set up in the center.

"Mr. Rafayel, since the Lemuria lecture series ended, what's the next series going to be about?"

"I bet it's paint! Look at that glass jar..."

This is a rare type of art class. Rafayel sits beside the canvas. He doesn't have a paintbrush or palette. Instead, he dips his hand into a vat of vibrant red paint.

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The students can smell a faint spiciness in the air.

"What are the plant ingredients in this paint? Chili peppers?"

"He can turn that into paint, huh? As expected of Mr. Rafayel."

"We can use hot sauce to paint from now on!"

"All you know is how to eat. As expected of a student."

Amidst the commotion, Rafayel remains fully engrossed in his paints.

"Various chili peppers can give different

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colors. Using plant pigments for painting is nothing special."

He pinches out a bit of red, rubs it between his fingers, and sniffs.

The colors have already spread out in his hands, yet the scent remains too faint. It hasn't reached the level he desires.

"Spiciness is a sensation, not only perceivable by the mouth but also by the skin. It's similar to painting."

Rafayel applies a stroke of red onto the canvas. "Color is also a sensation. If we

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only rely on our eyes to judge, it becomes superficial. Colors not only shift with the changing light of different times, but they also appear entirely different in the eyes of various creatures. That's why creating art and who's appreciating art are of great importance."

The students exchange glances. It's a simple principle, yet coming from Rafayel, it feels like it means something else.

"Mr. Rafayel, in your eyes... Is this not red?"

"Do you only see the color red?"

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Rafayel smiles but doesn't continue the conversation. The students, understanding his unspoken cue, tactfully steer the topic in a new direction.

"Mr. Rafayel, how long do you plan to stay in Linkon City? Can we still contact you after you finish your work here?"

"Yeah! When will you have another exhibition?"

...

On the canvas, varying shades of red are gradually layered. The pain from the spice seeps through his fingertips, beginning to

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stimulate an excited nerve.

Perhaps he will remain in Linkon City for a long time.

After all, he has yet to formally invite an art appreciator, and his paint is still not properly mixed.

The perfect moment will happen in the distant future.

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